



Strategic Planning and Implementation - Why So Difficult?

Hal Johnson

Yes, it's getting near that time of year when most businesses start preparing for one of their most important year-end processes: strategic planning. The team here at LeadershipOne gets to see many versions of this exercise. Since we focus on helping businesses manage some form of transition, we usually are involved in assisting clients update and upgrade this process. The whole process (planning and implementing) has the potential of enabling the most important changes a business should be making. But what happens in many organizations is that the daily grind displaces the reinvention process. The tyranny of the urgent (today's problems) often takes precedent over the change/renewal process.

The Balanced Scorecard Consortium at Harvard University reports that 90% of businesses struggle with implementing their strategic plans. The Consortium found that most organizations develop a strategic plan, but fall down when it comes to implementing it. In fact, they contend that implementation is the biggest issue facing business today. In the recent, popular business book *Execution* (Bossidy & Charan) the case is presented that execution (implementing your strategies) involves a specific set of behaviors and techniques that companies need to master in order to have competitive advantage - *it is a discipline of its own!*

Our experiences also confirm that implementation is an area that businesses struggle to master. Why is it so difficult? Here are some observations we have collected that we hope will help you to strengthen this important process.

1. **Strategy for change needs to be a priority –**
The human condition is this: we keep defaulting to our old habits. There is an incredibly strong pull from inside our personal guidance systems to resist change. For example, dieting and exercising immediately come to mind. Change is difficult. To make any significant change means we have to displace something we are currently doing or add something on to what we are already doing. Change is disruptive and subconsciously we fight it.
2. **Teams strengthen resolve –**
It's interesting that people very often team-up when they want to accomplish something they deem important. Weight-watchers, AA, cycling groups, and running clinics are good examples. Creating the resolve strong enough to overcome habitual behaviors is foundational. Continuing to nurture it is strategic. Teaming can off-set our personal resolve-deficiencies.
3. **The leadership team - captains of change -**
Senior management teams bring together all the right resources to focus on taking the business to a higher level of success. First, businesses rarely achieve extra-ordinary results unless they do something very strategic. That's why senior management teams, working together in a positive, contributive mode, can enable a business to out-perform its competitors and drive exceptional performance. Rarely does a business achieve its full potential unless the leadership team is highly effective at strategy implementation.

Okay, let's review. What's so difficult about strategic planning and implementation? Essentially, you have to deal with the three major hurdles described above. The job of business leaders is to focus on the processes that will enable their business to grow and thrive. In the context of strategic planning, below is a check-list of contributing elements of an effective, high-impact planning and implementation process. Now is the time for a "check-up from the neck-up." What can you do to make your process more effective this year?

- A. Recognize and embrace the priority to institute and maintain a robust strategy development implementation process. This means you are systematically identifying and bringing to reality **the most important things** to grow your business.



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- B. Aggressively administer an Action Plan of “most important things” that strategically enables you to live-out continuous improvement.
- C. Assure your leadership team is committed to support and provide the discipline to maintain a dynamic change-management process.
- D. Commit to the personal leadership to stay the course.

Easy? Nope. If it was, everybody would be doing it.

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